

fective, because it is neither a decorative comment on the action, nor a translation into sound of what happens, nor a sentimental background created to support the action and render the listener more receptive. It is part of the action. And without Copland's music, the two sequences would not exist. They would be practically incomprehensible.

George Antheil's music for *Once in a Blue Moon* touched me personally by its Parisian air. It brought back the Diaghilev productions of the late twenties. The musician's inspiration is fresh, whimsical cheerful. He plunges into highbrow polytonality and suddenly gives way to a rather commonplace street song. It is nearly always music, and sometimes it is even good. But it does not seem to be necessarily connected with the film, and although I feel charmed by his melodic invention, I cannot subscribe to Antheil's way of treating the film as an opportunity to "place" an agreeable score that could serve any other occasion as well.

The other excerpts presented the same evening had scores by Louis Gruenberg, Bernard Herrmann, Werner Janssen, Erich Korngold and Ernst Toch. Even if they have not found a definitive solution for the problems of screen-music these composers show that they know their job. Each one makes some lucky hits, such as the Schubert evocation in *So Ends Our Night* (Gruenberg), where a youth imprisoned in a Nazi jail, on hearing one of his companions whistling the

*Moment Musical* remembers his mother playing the piece in happier days. An excellent musical feature is also to be found in *Citizen Kane* (Herrmann), during a farcical singing lesson given to a tone-deaf lady by a grotesque Italian maestro. In both cases the musicians enrich the picture with effective details. Still one cannot say their music belongs to the action. More dramatic power is developed by Korngold in his score for *Juarez*, and by Ernst Toch in *Ladies in Retirement*. But a film-transposition of Italian *Verismo* brings to Hollywood all the bad taste and heavy sentimentality of *La Tosca* and *I Pagliacci*, and modern harmonization adds nothing to it. An impression is created by sensitiveness and quality of soul rather than by purely technical measures.

### III

For *King's Row*, Korngold has written a very important score. A real effort to avoid the defect of his past works may be noticed. Here is no mere commercial filler but a long studied, well meditated work. It is necessary to recognize in a score of this kind the "purity of the intention," even if the music is not altogether satisfactory. The Germanic romanticism that pervades the score is not always unpleasant. The sequence of the "Kinderscene" for instance is charming. But, alas, who shall deliver Erich Korngold and the Hollywood producers from those two fearful enemies, the Viennese *Gemüth* and the Berlinesse *Kitsch*?

## IN THE THEATRE

By SAMUEL L. M. BARLOW

I HEARD two American operas for the first time recently. One was a revival, one a world premiere. I wanted desperately to like them both, partly out

of respect for the two composers' genuine gifts, and partly to avoid the discomfort of a minority report, since one is a huge success and the other was received with loud applause.

It is true that applause is almost an anagram for applesauce and that William James' derision of the Bitch Goddess Success is still valid. Yet, over a period of time, Greuze and Massenet and Ernest Dowson possess their earned quota of immortality which is as genuine and as much their own as that of the giants. But it is precisely in the matter of the contemporary charmers that judgment is apt to be so wrong. There is only one fairly safe approach and that is in the form of a question: What did the artist think he was doing?

Both of the operas in hand were obviously thought of by their composers as being more than light entertainment. Both were the culmination of previous, less serious, work in the theatre. Both, to my mind, are unsuccessful for much the same reasons, the chief reason being that neither composer did what he set out to do.

In *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin intended to write a folk-opera. Virgil Thomson has pointed out that Gershwin had especially two of the many requirements for this task: naïveté and enthusiasm. But he lacked a more fundamental qualification, that of simplicity. Without simplicity, the score continually mounts to inflated turgidities which over and over again destroy the essential elements of the story.

Gershwin did not choose his own folk to write a folk-opera about – and that perhaps is the main error. To deal in another tongue, so to speak, requires a rare feeling for style and a deft and cul-

tivated technic. None of this he had. The imitation spiritual in the scene of lamentation – so superb in the original play, – sprang apparently from some plantation that was watered on one side by the Harlem River and on the other by the waters of Babylon.

Folk-opera starts out as an extremely local affair, laid in one community and concerned with special customs. Obviously, the local color must be correct, – for you cannot fool the folk about themselves. Catfish Row is not a part of Broadway. And one source of the confusion of this music is due to the fact that Gershwin never got to Catfish Row at all, not into its soul and hunger and smells and aspiration. Then, from the spring-board of sure fidelity to the genius loci, folk-opera should rise into the universal, reaching all hearts because it is truly founded. But when this music leaves Times Square and seeks the larger speech of the human heart, valid in any quarter of the country, we suddenly find ourselves in the good verities of Puccini, excellent in their place but strangely far from Charleston. What should be universal becomes again local – to Rome.

Here is no fervor and exaltation, none of the terror and hope of Moody and Sankey, as there was in *Run Little Child*. The moments of emotion are alien; and only in the four brilliant songs, where Broadway achieved its own universality and reached down to its reflection in Catfish Row, and where it was not necessary to seek the glowing depth of the Negro soul or idiom, is the mood caught with perfection. The rest is inadequate or pretentious.

Nowhere does the material rise to the level of the *Litany at Atlanta*, by DuBois, or the poems of Langston Hughes or

Johnson. (I have been reading *The Negro Caravan*, just brought out by the Negro Publication Society, and it's a fine book.) I felt all the time that Gershwin was working on a Negro folk-opera through the medium of Tin Pan Alley's version of the effect of W. C. Handy on white music, and then going into reverse. I remembered,

"O I been rebuked and I been scorned,  
Done had a hard time sho's you born."

And I felt that the power of self-rebuke and the astringence of scorn had never been Gershwin's lot. Was he so lucky in that?

The technical faults are really minor compared to the original chasm that separated him from his theme. The orchestration is frankly bad — always of the "accompaniment" sort. The connecting music clogs the show and robs it of all the keen impact which the original possessed. Gershwin could not build a musical scene, as Kern can. He was at his best with the piano, as in the *Rhapsody*, or with the song-number. At least, in *Porgy and Bess*, there is a place, a right place, for several songs, and let it be said that some of them have entered our musical language and will stay there in a small but spruce immortality.

Gian-Carlo Menotti's *The Island God* is Grand Opera, very Grand indeed. It is philosophical, as *The Sunken Bell* was philosophical. It deals with Gods and Men. Its characters move with that stride peculiar to heavy singers and the Priestesses of Isis: a step, a drag, feet together, a step. There is but little more action than there is in *Phèdre*. And all that is quite all right, for most of Gluck is like that. But it needs the Grand Manner, the long line, the noble simplicity. These are not at Menotti's command. There is

one impassioned and fine duet, but it is not the vatic utterance of the Man-type to the Woman-type on God's island, only a fine vocal number rather better than anything in *André Chenier*.

Where *Porgy and Bess* should have left the specific for the universal, this opera has a hard time leaving the universal for the specific. Euripides and Racine endowed their Olympians with such personal and sharp contours that we see them in the round, and love or hate or fear for them. But these characters unfortunately remained types, and the music never quite gave them a stature commensurate with their immobility.

The story is a sad one, and I fear amoral. Man has created God in his own image; he worships this embodiment of his aspirations. When life gets too much for him (and, really, this individual only got what was coming to him, for a more morose and egotistical fellow was rarely met), he destroys his God and thereby himself. No worshipper, no God. I don't believe that for a second, any more than I believe Wagner's Norse rubbish; and it doesn't matter. What does matter is that Menotti set himself a task that could only be carried out successfully with the Grand Manner (imagine the Fricka scenes, or *Orpheus*, without it) and that was lacking. It is hard to say just what it is: but it is vibrant rather than nervous, long-limbed rather than choppy, grandly slow rather than pompous. Menotti's talents of deftness and humor, of concise craftsmanship, of the charming and spontaneous lyric line, deserted him in the face of this Memnon which he had conjured up and which refused to sing. It is hard to be neat with an elephant; and Menotti should return to the tidy elegance of his Theocritan goats and the

jolly notes of his tibia.

The singers were excellent. The production was poor. Some kind of Eurasian scenery replaced what a real artist, Behrman, had so exquisitely planned. The three coaches who coach singers at the Metropolitan all speak broken English. The echo of their inadequacy (and some of the fault lies on the singers, too, though a competent coach would have corrected them) appeared in such lines as, "Ilona, leesten; I weel combe bok tonight." And the R's were generally trilled, like the noises of the tree-toad. I thought that often the translator had let well enough too much alone; you cannot use so few syllables as in Italian and hang on to them for bars. English prosody is a snare, to be matched only by a careful study of the *Venite* on a Sun-

day morning, or better still of *Four Saints*.

It is hard to say what I felt both *The Island God* and *Porgy and Bess* lacked, without seeming sententious. But one of them deals very definitely with God and the other with Man, collective Man, the folk. In other words, the subjects connote the larger reaches of the spirit and imagination — pity, magnanimity, reverence. One of them requires grandeur of style, the other simplicity. And I wondered if these qualities could be achieved without much preoccupation with them. I thought, by contrast, of St. Augustine who "had grown deaf with the clanking of the chain of his mortality." And of Wagner, who could assume a virtue which he was far from possessing. And I am at a loss for the answers.

## WITH THE DANCERS

By EDWIN DENBY

ON the Carmen Amaya question, it was her *Ay que tu* number at Carnegie Hall that convinced me she is an extraordinary dancer. It is a kind of comic number. A gypsy girl sings to her lover, "You can't make me jealous; you go pretending to make love to others, but you always come back to me and say, There's only you, beautiful, there's only you." Amaya was wearing the typical flamenco dress, with its many flounces and a long train, but she looked like a girl of thirteen, angular as a boy, in her first evening gown. She fought her train into place, like a wild-animal trainer. Her voice was hoarse and small, her gesture abrupt and awkward. All this with the defiance of the song made the dance comic. But the figure of the tough slum

child Amaya suggested was as real to you as the person sitting next you in the audience. You felt its private individual life, before and after this moment you were watching. And there was nothing pathetic, no appeal for help in it. And so you grinned and laughed, as much at home as with Villon "en ce bourdeau, où tenons nostre estat;" and the fierce adolescence on the stage looked as wonderful as tragedy does.

Realness in comedy is very very rare among dancers; and the cruelly comic is of course one of the special gifts of Spain. Now that I've seen Amaya do it, I have the greatest admiration for her. Before, at the Beachcomber, at Loew's State, and in some Argentinista-style numbers at Carnegie, I had been rather disappointed.